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From: Mylott, Richard
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Some Pavillion-area residents oppose Wyo.-EPA-Encana deal on study that implicated fracking

By Associated Press

CHEYENNE, Wyo. — People who have been living with tainted well water in central Wyoming voiced concern Friday that they were excluded from a deal that has the state taking over further study of groundwater pollution from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The Northern Arapaho Tribe raised concerns after the agreement was announced Thursday between the EPA, Wyoming and Encana Corp., owner of the Pavillion gas field. The Arapaho and the Eastern Shoshone Tribe both live on the Wind River Reservation, which surrounds the drilling area.

The EPA theorized in 2011 that the petroleum industry practice of hydraulic fracturing may have contaminated the groundwater near the town of Pavillion. The EPA now says it won't issue a final report or have outside experts review the research as originally planned.

Instead, Wyoming will take over the study in Encana's field of about 125 gas wells, with help from \$1.5 million from Encana.

"We went to EPA for help after the state of Wyoming and Encana refused to address the public health impacts of unbridled development in the Pavillion area," said John Fenton, chairman of the group Pavillion Area Concerned Citizens. "Now Encana has bought their way back in and is working with the state on a strategy to cover up the mess they've created. Our government's priority is clearly to protect industry rather than Wyoming citizens, our health and our property values."

Gov. Matt Mead said Friday he has been talking with affected residents and understands their suspicion. But he said the EPA has recognized that Wyoming is best positioned to act.

“I think it’s right that they are concerned, and I think it’s even appropriate that they are skeptical,” Mead said in a phone interview. “And I think it’s up to the state in leading this investigation to do it in a way that addresses their concerns.”

Mead met with the affected residents and said many of them have expressed gratitude for his interest in having state agencies resolve their problems.

Some people in the Pavillion area said their water began to reek of chemicals in 2005, around the same time that Encana began to employ hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, to boost production of nearby gas wells. Fracking encourages the flow of oil and gas underground by splitting open rock with a high-pressure mix of water, fine sand and chemicals pumped into wells.

Fenton and others say Wyoming agencies didn’t do enough to address their complaints, so they asked the EPA to investigate. The EPA announced in December 2011 its finding that fracking could have played a role in some pollution found in two wells it drilled to sample groundwater.

A statement Thursday from the Northern Arapaho Tribe expressed concern that the state and EPA worked out the agreement without reaching out to the tribe.

Darrell O’Neal, chairman of the Northern Arapaho Business Council, said it’s probably a good thing that Pavillion issues are getting attention at the highest levels.

“The governor and his associates in D.C. need to do a better job involving residents of Fremont County and representatives of tribal government in the process,” he said.